

The Good, the Bad, the Male, the Female

The Influence of Gender on Leadership

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Abstract

This paper explores the differences among male and female leaders and evaluates the qualities popularly assigned to history's most powerful, memorable leaders. It outlines the biological differences among male and female brains and the cognitive (or lack there of) disparities between their cognitive functioning. Furthermore, the characteristics of effective leadership are not indicative of either the male or female gender, rather societal standards of males and females affects the characteristics of male and female leaders. Finally, it assesses historical examples of both a male and female leader, their traits, and their efficiencies in their leadership roles.

Male and female qualities are not necessarily better than the other, rather these attributes make all of us human. Gender should not influence traits of leadership, yet we allow it to. There are no male and female qualities of leaderships, only good and bad qualities of leadership. This paper delves into the influence of gender on leadership by examining the cognitive differences among men and women, assessing the popularly assigned qualities of a leader, and comparing two historical leaders, male and female, and their abilities, Tsar Nicholas 2nd and Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

Advances in technology allowed researchers to delve further into the biological differences between men and women using brain scan technology. Previously, society assumed these differences from the purely physical characteristics of men and women, and the emotional traits assigned to each gender by generations of sexist and outdated societal beliefs. For generations, cultures viewed women as the meeker, weaker sex, their bodies meant for child-bearing and their minds meant for care-giving. They existed as the emotional counterpart for men's logical instinctiveness. But how much – if any – of these beliefs find footing in actual neurological science? Researchers at the UC-Irvine used brain imaging technology to discover the physical disparities among male and female brains. "Women, it's known, retain stronger, more vivid memories of emotional events than men do. They recall emotional memories more quickly, and the ones they recall are richer and more intense," (Goldman, 2018). Researchers theorize this ability among females helps explain their proclivity towards depression and mood disorders than their male counterparts. Furthermore, the right and left hemispheres of the brain behave differently among men and women.

"The two hemispheres of a woman's brain talk to each other more than a man's do. In a 2014 study, University of Pennsylvania researchers imaged the brains of 428 male and 521 female youths — an uncharacteristically huge sample — and found that the females' brains consistently showed more strongly coordinated activity between hemispheres, while the males' brain activity was more tightly coordinated within local brain regions," (Goldman, 2018).

Scientists can only hypothesize how these translates into behavioral characteristics among men and women, however, this further provides evidence that biological differences occur between the sexes. The question then remains, do these biological discrepancies influence the leadership and cognitive qualities of males and females? Despite cultural norms and long-held beliefs, males and female display little to no difference in cognitive functioning. "Synthesizing data collected on more than 3 million participants between 1967 and 1987, the researchers found no large overall differences between boys and girls in math performance," (American Psychology Association, 2014). The widely held belief in males' natural mathematical prowess may explain the male and female inequalities in a class room setting. Teachers possessing pre-determined standards of gender-assigned norms for learning aptitudes will most likely allow boys to answer mathematical questions more often than females, rather than allowing the sexes equal participation opportunities. Furthermore, the notion that females enjoyed linguistic advantages over males appears untrue as well. "As for verbal ability, in 1988, Hyde and colleagues reported that data from 165 studies revealed a female advantage so slight as to be meaningless, despite previous assertions that girls are more verbally adept. What's more, the authors found no evidence of substantial gender differences in any component of verbal processing," (American Psychology Association, 2015). Studies show time and time again that males and females display little cognitive advantages over one another. Yet despite evidence to the contrary, outdated beliefs still persist in educational settings. It comes then as little surprise that these notions permeate society's standards in politics and leadership as well.

When one envisions a powerful leader, he or she may cite the conventional qualities assigned to powerful leaders than the leader as an actual person. For example, when ruminating on the propensities of Winston Churchill, one may first recall his confidence, his charisma, his courage, and his ability to sway others to his beliefs, rather than his political and personal accomplishments. Other merits including responsibility, modesty, integrity, compassion, ruthlessness, vision, and innovation may further separate leaders from average politicians to powerful rulers. This occurs for a reason; influential historical leaders consistently display these qualities. The descriptions gifted to Abraham Lincoln may in the same breath be given to Adolf Hitler: sympathy, veracity, confidence, and magnetism. These characteristics, nevertheless, possess no sexual inclination. Women display honor, assurance, aggressiveness, empathy, personality, intelligence, and cleverness with the same proficiency as men. How then can one explain the sexual disparities among leadership positions? Though most research illustrates that men and women report little differences in expectations and qualities of male and female leaders, one must then accept that societal beliefs influence how male and female leaders behave and perform more than anatomical traits. "The first is the 'double standard': A female candidate for a powerful role has to put her agentic side on display to reassure people that she can take charge, which is hardly ever an issue for men. The second is the 'double bind': When women in leadership roles do act tough, there is a backlash against them for being too tough," (Eagly, 2016). Women therefore must navigate a middle-ground, treading a fine line between overly-weak and overly-aggressive. Any deviation places a female leader at risk of receiving negative press. Furthermore, cultural norms inflict restrictions on young girls at an early age, stressing politeness and demureness over the more aggressive tendencies allowed in young boys. "In groups that make decisions by majority rule, women "not only talk less than men, but they talk much less than their presence in the group [would otherwise indicate]," Karpowitz said. In other words, if women make up 20 percent of a group, the amount of their participation in the conversation typically falls short of 20 percent," (Eagly, 2016). Fear of appearing injudicious and brash limits how women contribute in group settings dominated by men. Our society's penchant for assigning male and female characteristics only harms both sexes in the long term. Women with equal cognitive capabilities as men either cannot or will not perform to their best of their abilities because of these standards, thus muting and limiting probabilities of political and social progress.

Women do not make better leaders than men; men do not make better leaders than women. A person either cultivates the characteristics of powerful leaders, or they do not. Consider two historical examples of male and female leadership, Tsar Nicholas the Second and Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Famine, war, and rebellion marked Tsar Nicholas's the second reign as ruler of Russia. The doomed leader inherited the throne with literal tears, following the immediate death of his father, Tsar Alexander the Third.

"The young Nicholas could not have been less like his father: he was short, shy and softly-spoken, by all accounts a good student of above average intelligence but hardly imposing or intimidating. Those who met the young tsarevich described him as pleasant and likeable, but otherwise unremarkable – hardly the traits of a man ordained by God to rule Russia," (Alpha History, 2014).

Tsar Nicholas the Second lacked confidence and often made ill-informed, short-sighted decisions, among those the failed Russo-Japanese War that catapulted his country into poverty and famine. He ignored the issues that plagued his country (some from his own doing) and disingenuously promised his people "change" but made little to no effort to fulfill his promises. This timid man allowed his overbearing and unexperienced wife, Princess Alexandra of Hesse, to meddle in Russian politics and trust the advice of Rasputin, the mad monk. All of these eventually lead to the Russian Civil War, the downfall of Russian tsarism, and the murder of his entire family, including his wife and children. Tsar Nicholas the Second simply lacked the qualities of a good leader; his failure had little to do with his sex. A more recent

example, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, shows opposing abilities to the disastrous Russian leader. Born to a Somali revolutionary and intellectual, Ayaan Hirsi Magan, Ali grew up under the strict, fundamentalist rule of Islam, suffering customary Somali-genital cutting and forced marriage to her. She fled her future partner and marriage by applying for Asylum in the Netherlands, which she received. While there, Western Political theory and volunteered for social organizations.

“In the Netherlands, Hirsi Ali studied political science at the State University of Leiden and graduated with a master’s degree in 2000. She then worked for the centre-left Labour Party (Partij van de Arbeid; PvdA) as a researcher on immigration issues. While with the party, she developed a reputation as a sharp critic both of Islam and of the Dutch government’s policies toward immigration and the integration of immigrants (especially Muslims) into Dutch society,” (Gorlinski, 2018).

She opposed Islam’s traditional treatment of women and teamed with Dutch filmmaker, Theo van Gogh to film the documentary *Submission*, to expose the abuse Muslim women suffered under strict Islamic rule. For this, received numerous death threats and traveled to the United States for protection. Despite the continuous dangers of violence and terror she receives, Ayaan Hirsi Ali continues her life as an activist and serves as voice for oppressed women everywhere. Brave, intelligent, and charismatic, she consistently and emphatically displays her capabilities as a leader despite her sex and traditional expectations of women. Ayaan Hirsi Ali is not a great leader because she is a female, she is a great leader because she possesses the competencies of one.

By observing the lack of intellectual gaps among men and women, the sexless qualities allocated to powerful leaders, and the differences between two political officers, Tsar Nicholas the Second and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, this piece exemplifies that the differences among male and female leaders exists not with biological differences, but rather societal norms and expectations of the two sexes. Rather than favor one gender over the other, our society would do well to avoid flippantly categorizing individuals based on their physical, sexual, and religious beliefs and appearances. In the end, we are all humans. Despite historical inclinations and societal views, men and women are both prone to honesty, to dishonesty, to fairness, to bias, to confidence, to meekness, to swiftness, to slowness, to all facilities that brand a leader good or bad.

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